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By Tom Moran

In the close House vote on health reform last week, only 39 Democrats defected, the bulk of them from the South.

But one was from New Jersey - John Adler, a freshman congressman who squeaked into office during the Obama landslide in a district that had been held by Republicans for more than a century.

His concern is cost. He feels House Democrats blew it by not including tougher cost controls. So he defected from the party on its signature issue - no way for a new kid to make friends.

If you want to examine the politics around the health reform debate, Adler's defection offers a window.

Here's the positive spin: He studied the issue hard, sleeping in his office most nights on an air mattress, talking to every expert he could find. And he stood his ground on principle, raising his cost concern to President Obama aboard Air Force One, and to Speaker Nancy Pelosi over and over.

Votes like his, he hopes, will force better cost controls in the bill as it winds its way through Congress.

"This is the time to do it, when you're doling out all these good things," Adler says. "Doctors are winners in this. Hospitals are winners. Pharmaceuticals are winners. So this is the time to do the hard stuff."

Fair enough.

Now here's the negative spin: Adler is from South Jersey, a region that's full of conservative Democrats. If he's seen as a wild liberal, his career in Washington will be a short one. He's being timid when courage is called for.

Besides, no bill is perfect. Grown-ups understand that politics is the art of the possible.

One classic example from history: When Lincoln first freed the slaves, he exempted the four slave states that were fighting with the Union because he still needed their help on the battlefield.

"Would you vote against the Emancipation Proclamation because it wasn't perfect?" asks Rep. Rob Andrews, a fellow South Jersey Democrat.

So which view of Adler's vote is the right one? Probably both. A good politician has to balance all this.

In the meantime, Adler has a wish-list of changes he wants. We could end the tax exemption for the most expensive health plans to encourage frugality. We could offer incentives for people to lose weight or lower their blood pressure. We could reimburse doctors for good outcomes instead of paying them more for each extra procedure.

"There's no one perfect answer," he says. "But there isn't any cost-containment in this bill."

That statement goes well overboard. This bill increases competition among insurers by establishing an exchange where shoppers can compare plans easily, and ensuring that one of the offerings will be a government plan. It reduces Medicare payments and includes pilot programs to explore new payment methods. If a pilot works, it can be expanded without permission from Congress.

It also finally applies anti-trust laws to insurers so they cannot collude on prices, and caps the portion of premiums they can keep as profit.

Adler wants more, as do most experts. And resistance from people like him will probably make this bill better before the final vote.

He won't say it, but you get the impression he will support the reform in the end, even if the bill doesn't change much.

"I'm for the public option," he says. "And we need to fix the insurance abuses, the sneaky little caps on coverage you don't know are in there."

When Adler was a high school junior, his father died after four heart attacks. He wound up paying his way through Harvard with loans and jobs waiting tables.

To this day, Adler believes his father, the owner of a small dry-cleaning shop, died prematurely because he had no health insurance. He left the hospital too soon.

"Health reform is vital for families," Adler says. "I think we're probably worse off not to have a bill at all."

So keep an eye on Adler. If people like him can be won over, we may have national health care within a few months.